



King County: Small, But Great

By U.S. Sen. John Cornyn

My mother is fond of reminding me that the best things in life often come in small packages. That's true even in Texas, where 'biggest' and 'best' often are confused with one another.

Her sentiment is especially apt when talking about Texas counties – particularly in West Texas, where some counties have a greater number of square miles than people. Some of them enjoy a colorful past that any region would envy.

Few people may know about the second-least populated county and its many unsung attributes. (Loving County, population 62, is the smallest.) King County, in northwest Texas, with its 300 or so solid citizens, enjoys such a rich history.

The county is named in honor of a pioneer family that sacrificed so that fellow Texans might live in freedom. William Philip King was the son of John and Parmelia King, and he lived with his family north of Gonzales, Texas.

In 1836, at a critical point in Texas history, John King was preparing to shepherd a relief force from Gonzales to help embattled Texans mobilizing in San Antonio, 75 miles away. William stepped forward and took John's place so that his father could stay at home to care for the rest of the family.

William King ultimately was the youngest man to die at the Battle of the Alamo. He was 15 years old.

Forty years later, in 1876, the Texas Legislature formed King County from lands previously assigned to Bexar County, naming the new jurisdiction in honor of the brave young man from Gonzales.

Settlement came slowly. Apaches and then Comanches of the Wanderer band still controlled the region until the latter part of the 19th Century.

Then ranchers and cowboys took over. The middle of King County is halfway between Lubbock and Wichita Falls. In 1883, the Louisville [Kentucky] Land and Cattle Company acquired the land that now includes Guthrie, the King County seat. In 1891, the courthouse went up and a post office was granted. A year later, the first school was built. At the turn of the century, the population had grown to 490.

Legendary Texan Samuel Burk Burnett later bought out the Louisville Land and Cattle Company, and established his ranch, the "Four Sixes." Some of the other great ranches in the area included the Pitchfork, the Matador, and the SMS. By 1929, King County population peaked at nearly 1,200 people.

A three-year drought plagued the area during the Great Depression, and by 1940, the number of farms in the county was down to 110. Oil was discovered in 1943, revitalizing the economy, but mechanization of the agriculture economy led to a slow and steady decrease in county population throughout the 20th Century.

Today, a remnant of the county's substantial range cattle heritage can be seen in the form of old windmills, used by ranchers starting in the late 1800s, to lift well water to the ground's surface. Several are still standing.

The Four Sixes gained national attention as a setting for several Marlboro ads during the 1960s at a time when cigarette ads were still allowed on television. Several rugged-looking ranch hands had a turn posing as the "Marlboro Man." In 1975, the Four Sixes ranch headquarters in Guthrie became a movie location for "Macintosh and T.J.," starring Roy Rogers.

King County's past is memorialized in the plains at the King County Cemetery in Guthrie, which is surrounded by Four Sixes land. The tombstones tell of the patriotism and gritty work ethic of the town's founders: Leo Roark, "Served in the Texas War of Independence." Uncle George Watson, "Thirty Years a Pitchfork Cowboy," And Henry Blackwell, "Depot Brigade WW I."

Yes, King County is sparsely populated today. In fact, with 307 listed in the 2005 census estimate, it has the third-smallest population of any county in the nation.

But within King County lives a rich history of brave men and women who worked hard to tame a frontier land – to fend off adversaries, both human and natural, and to make a life that is meaningful and rewarding. It is the story of Texas itself.

Sen. Cornyn is a member of the following Senate Committees: Armed Services, Judiciary, Budget, Small Business and Entrepreneurship, and Joint Economic. He is the chairman of the subcommittees on Immigration, Border Security and Citizenship and Emerging Threats and Capabilities. Cornyn served previously as Texas Attorney General, Texas Supreme Court Justice and Bexar County District Judge.

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